

# **Buddhist Principles Pertaining To International Understanding, Friendship and Co-existence**

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The subject as taken up for discussion today, we have no doubt, has primarily in mind the collectivist group consideration of states or nations. Hence the use of the word international here. On account of the power or pressure they wield, for or against one another, the states and nations seem to be the elements in the world today that seriously matter, quite unmindful of their total composition, of the diverse components that constitute them. But these latter, i.e. the smaller ethnic or religious or political segments within each major group like the state, seem to be the ones whose relationships to one another need to be both regulated and constantly watched and looked after. It is friction and disharmony among them that eventually lead to a total shattering or blow up of the larger unit.

But at world level, we conscientiously feel, this is a really serious situation which does not get the attention it deserves. Sri Lanka, by no means, is an exception to this. If we are viewing problems at world level, let us immediately declare that whatever the political composition or structure of the states be, it would do no good to the world leaving out other considerations like ethnic and religious groups within them. We have enough evidence of this in the world today. Almost in every part of the world, matters of state are now strongly coloured by these ethnic and religious under currents which are prevalent within it. Let us be honest about these and not make the mistake of putting the telescope to the blind eye, merely for our convenience. It would be no less than deliberate self-deception.

In the world of today in which concepts of time and space have established their unassailable supremacy, any attempt to talk merely in terms of even the

larger segmented regional identities like states and nations makes it look like a childish endeavour. There can be no supreme power blocks like today's political groupings, which choose to stand polarized to one another. It is not for us to mention here any one of them by name. As we peep into the vastness of outer space and try to glean something out of the galaxies or the lost visions of the black holes, we realize that we have very little here with us that can be used as yardsticks to reckon time or space. Even millenia are found to be too short to reckon time. So is it with space. Buddhists therefore endeavour to view the world and the problems within it with a different relationship of parts to the whole, the smaller being as vital as the larger. We pick up man as the vital ingredient, no matter in which part of the globe he is located. This adds flavour or gives bitterness to the final product of world events, the greater part of which are man manipulated. Therefore policies national or international, no matter of what origin, must not shabbily override man.

It is worth mentioning here that Buddhists seem to have had some definite idea about time and space in this context. They spoke in terms of several millions of incalculable spans of time. Note that this is what is conveyed in the phrase we use in Sinhala as *sāra asaṅkha kalpa laksaya*. *Asaṅkha* means incalculable or beyond reckoning and *kalpa* [= a mind product] means a span of time, theoretical or imaginary, which is a product of speculation. Thus in Buddhist literature, growth and perfection of a human being to Buddhahood operates within such perimetres. Hence Buddhism is seen to be co-lateral with time. It does not belong to a segment of it.

The real goal of Buddhism, it may safely be said, is no more than gaining the awareness of the reality of human life [*yathābhūta* or *yathābhucca*], in its multidimensional operation in both directions of positive and negative, i.e. of man's continuance in *samsāra* and his termination of it in the attainment of Nirvana [i.e. of stepping out of it]. They are self-existent truths, and are revealed to the world by the Buddhas or Enlightened Ones from time to time. In fact this is called the Ancient Path or *Purāṇam Maggaṃ Purāṇam Añjasam* [S.N.II.106]. The

Buddha is said to proclaim to mankind only this reality of the world, i.e. *dukkha* and its termination or *nirodha* [M.N.I.140]. They are both within this vast reckoning of time and space. They have no dead lines. There is no such thing as by which date or where one gains salvation. Salvation in Buddhism is well and truly an evolutionary process for each and every worldling, to be achieved and accomplished severally by oneself.

This aspect of the world vision of the Buddhists must be clearly borne in mind when one tries to understand or one attempts to be critical of the Buddhist evaluation of world situations. It is open for scrutiny and assessment by any interested persons or parties. A refusal to pay adequate heed to it would necessarily lead to undesirable confusion and unwarranted contradictions. This applies today to the Buddhist as much as to the non-Buddhist. Buddhists, it must be stressed, do not lean on any unquestionable divine injunctions handed over to them, for the defence of which they have to surrender their human scruples. These Buddhist view points have been clearly stated in no uncertain terms well over twenty-five centuries ago.

The tragedy today, as we reckon it, both to the student of religion and to the social scientist who attempts to draw more and more from this wisdom of the ancients, is that these early Buddhist teachings which are recorded in the Indian dialect referred to as Pali are often not translated into English with the precision and accuracy they deserve. Unhesitatingly we pay our tribute to the translators for all that they have done for us. But we also lament at the same time about the inadequacy of their products. To the English translators, more often than not, these ideas were perhaps far ahead of their times. They had not even begun to think on those mature philosophical and scientific lines. Asia of the sixth century B.C. was well ahead of its neighbours elsewhere, in its awareness of the world in which the humans lived. They speculated and argued logically about its genesis, and placed all things within it in well regulated relationships. Man and nature were delightfully integrated, without any assistance from the environmentalists of today who have to sweat and toil in this field to push their point of view, and that

with incredibly limited results.

Rain for instance, as the source of water which triumphantly holds its position as the backbone of all that grows on the land, is praised and eulogised in the Rgveda, even two or three thousand years before the time of the Buddha, as life-giver to the plant world [*Parjanyaḥ ...reto dadhāti osadhīsu garbhaṃ* - Rgveda]. Rain or the Production of Rain is elevated to the status of a divinity and goes by the name Parjanya. Even Sri Lankan Buddhists seem to pick up this Indian idea and reiterate and reverberate it in their benedictory chants or *Parittas* when they invoke blessings for agricultural prosperity through abundant rain, saying *devo vassatu kālena sassa-sampatti hotu ca*. But make no mistake. The word *devo* here implies no invocation of any divinity. *Devo* does not mean god or any single god. It is an animated process of nature. It just means rain and the chant is for the rain to come down in season [*devo vassatu kālena*] to facilitate abundant growth of corn [*sassa-sampatti hotu ca*]. It is the harmonious and joint operation of these diverse processes which constitutes life in the universe.

The foregoing remarks would by now have made it quite clear as to what kind of religion or philosophy Buddhism is in its relation to the people whose lives it endeavours to reform and develop. Invoking the name of Buddhism should solely be for the furtherance of their goals of success at a down to earth level here, as well as for the enrichment and enhancement of their aspirations in terms of a life beyond this. Since both these segments of culture or development of the humans is clearly kept in mind in the Buddhist teachings, the Buddha did never underscore one in preference to the other. Therefore Buddhism can never entertain the idea of separating religion or keeping religion at a distance from the day to day life of man.

Religion, we maintain, can never exist apart from life. It has to be an integral part of life at all levels, whether it be an individual trying to make a living for himself or the rulers struggling to run the state machinery. It is sheer bluff, we believe, or total ignorance, if anything to the contrary is proposed or attempted. Even the western world, with their so-called advances in material culture and with

world records in their achievements in science and technology, is sensitively becoming aware of this. In no uncertain terms they now declare that 'religion is the missing dimension of statecraft'. This indeed is much more than they could comfortably say. This is the title of a book recently published by no less a distinguished centre like the Oxford University Press. It very seriously implies that political thinking has to be both carefully modified by and adequately blended with sound religious considerations. We refer here to the publication: *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (1994. Edited by Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson. New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press).

What we have described so far are areas in which the Buddhists of our country, as well as the Buddhists world over, have to be re-educated. One must first gain a thorough grounding in the philosophy of Buddhism before one makes an endeavour to govern and regulate either oneself or one's country in the Buddhist way. In this conference we believe we are making an honest attempt to study how it could be done in consonance with the word of the Buddha. It has to be admitted that Buddhism's major contribution to the uplift of human life in this very life, via religion, is the Noble Eightfold Path. It is called the *Magga* or the Way. It is the last of the Four Noble Truths propounded in Buddhism.

We look upon this Path as a spiritual ladder, and we insist on calling it an upward-leading ladder, starting at a very basic ground level of the commoner or the worldling. It is not necessarily for any kind of spiritual elite. This Path is neither a circle nor a track of circular movement, without a specific starting point. This way, in its upward journey, reflects a unique combination of the growth and development of the mundane or the worldly aspect of life as well as of the development of the transcendental or the supramundane. In the upward ascent, the Buddhist gradually gets away from and leaves behind all the disturbing and distracting elements of the world. Mark my words here: disturbing and distracting. These are like the reality of the earth's law of gravitation which resists the movement of objects away from earth. This has to be combatted and needs much effort on the part of every individual. Nevertheless, this entire process of

reform takes place while we are still here in our down to earth existence. The human thus becomes divine within his own mortal frame.

It is this unique position in Buddhism of possible human reform, up to its maximum, while still being human, which can offer the world a comforting hope of a universal renaissance or a global reform. In its very simple and straightforward Noble Eightfold Path, Buddhism requires its followers to undertake a revision and correction of human attitudes and aspirations, both in relation to oneself as well as in terms of collectivist interpersonal relationships in society. It is calculated to bring about a new sense of moral rectitude or social propriety. It undoubtedly appears to be very demanding on the average worldling. These changes, nevertheless, are insisted upon. Attitudes and aspirations being corrected, it is rightly assumed that humans would thereafter be generous and humane in their behaviour, in their relations to one another and to the world in which they live, with acceptable norms of conduct in word and deed.

If men and women of the world can be, individually and collectively, cast in such a mould of human behavioural acceptability, not in mere theory but in actual reality, then and only then will we make some sense in talking in terms of states or nations, political ideologies or religious denominations. Each group, of whichever sort it be, if it thinks only in terms of its own parochial supremacy and self-correctness, then all talk of international, inter-reigious or inter-ethnic harmonious relationships gets reduced to mere lip service. The results would be no more than mere treatises, signed after deliberations at round table conferences, by men and women who talk with the tongue in their cheek. Can we count even on a veneer of honesty and sincerity, directed towards the cause of peace and harmony in the world we live in? It is well and truly that too many camera-men and media personnel glorify these events at mock international levels.

Buddhism's ideas of goodness and correctness are conceived and constructed at global level, without unduly narrowing them down with the use of dubious concepts like international. For the word international seems

unfortunately to imply the exclusive existence of a few mighty national blocks. It is to be admitted that words like nations and religions are divisive in their very connotations. Buddhism as a religion being anthropo-centric in its basic principles and primary aspirations, has more than a global concept of human welfare. Its concerns and considerations are more than terrestrial. Assuming and accepting the possibility of extra-terrestrial life, well outside this *terra firma* which everyone, nation and state, wants to own with great pride and defend or hold on to tenaciously at any cost, Buddhism extends its love and concern towards life everywhere. Even theoretically, it seems to reckon with the bio-diversity and the vast eco-systems that we speak of today as surrounding us.

In this context, let everyone be reminded of that jewel of a sutra of the Buddhists of the Theravada tradition which is very popularly known as the Metta Sutta or Karaniya Metta Sutta [at Sutta Nipata PTS. p.25]. It presents to everyone, and that more than two and a half millennia ago, a vision of life in the universe, in a clearer perspective than even the Hubble Space Telescope of more recent times. Reckoning with life everywhere, distance and lack of visibility are ruled out from being impediments which would impose unjustifiable limitations in expressing our respect and concern for life. Whether life be near or far, seen or unseen [*diṭṭhā vā yeva addiṭṭhā ye ca dūre vasanti avidūre* loc. cit], one can still extend one's unlimited love and benevolent thoughts in every direction. Time-wise, the present and the future are equally well encompassed, including within one's expression of love all living things that have come into being and those that are yet to come [*bhūtā vā sambhavesī vā* loc.cit]. It is enjoined that one should wish for the comfort and happiness of all that exists every where [*sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā* loc.cit].

As far as the tradition of the Buddhists goes, all relationships, national or international, have to take note of the above considerations and accommodate them within their policy making. Anywhere within the four quarters, according to the norms of Buddhist thinking, there should ideally be no evidence of conflict [*cātuddiso appaṭigho ca hoti*. Sutta Nipata v.42]. Those outside one's pale of

thinking, one should not struggle to bag into one's own collection, political, religious or ethnic. For they all have a right to exist, each on his own. But we witness this policy, a policy if it can be called, being carried out all around us, almost globally in a massive scale, reaching up to staggering giddy heights. To desist from this, we admit, is indeed a lofty ideal to be pursued, uncompromising like the count down in the firing off of space shuttles into outer space. The failure of one invariably leads to the failure of the other.

It is with this uncompromising vision before them that Buddhist texts of unquestionable antiquity and authenticity present to us the state policy of the Buddhist Universal Monarch or Cakkavatti King. Undoubtedly with more legend and less history therein, the Cakkavatti King comes before us as a just world ruler before whom all others who had hitherto ruled over their own territories in the east, west, north and south willingly surrender and request him for guidance and instruction as to the mode of government they should follow. He utters not a word to them pertaining to any explicit or implicit division of spoils. He insists that all rulers who come to him govern their respective kingdoms as they have done before [*yathābhuttañca bhujjatha*]. This is a very firm injunction which implies that this just ruler does not contemplate restructuring the political pattern of any other country or of any other ruler to suit his own wishes and intentions. Obviously there is no attempt at indoctrination of any sort, political or religious. This is clear enough evidence of a spirit of magnanimity in this area of religion and statecraft, rarely heard of anywhere else in the world, then or now.

He is equally firm in his requirement that all rulers, anywhere and everywhere, safeguard the moral tone of their territories, ensuring the security of the people, i.e. of the humans of the land as well as of the birds and the beasts. We witness that in specifying these areas of just rule, what the Cakkavatti King does is no more than lay down over again the injunctions of the *Pañcasīla*. They are that 1. No life should be destroyed [*pāṇo na hantabbo*], 2. None should be dispossessed of their legitimately acquired and owned possessions [*adinnaṃ na ādātabbam*], 3. There should be no violation of propriety of sex relationships



between men and women, married or unmarried [*kāmesu na micchā caritabbā*. Note that this definitely does not refer to the gratification of five-fold sense pleasures !], 4. Honesty should be respected everywhere [*musā na bhaṇitabbā*] and 5. Alcohol and drugs which impair soundness of judgement [*yaṃ pivitvā visaññāssa*] should not be consumed [*suram na pātabbam*].

In the social context of the world then, these five items would have been more than adequate to regulate the lives of men and women, safeguarding each one's rights, without any unjust violations, even in terms of today's much talked of gender differences. Even the charter of Fundamental Human Rights, generated in the wake of the atrocities of World War II, does not come anywhere near this code of five-fold precepts.

It is this requirement for any one for who carries with him or her the designation of 'ruler of the land' to ensure and safeguard the moral tone in their territories which gives these considerations of statecraft their distinctive Buddhist flavour. Not the mere partisan consideration of a ruler being the 'defender of the faith'. It is not a mere assignment or alignment which backs up political power. It is an affiliation with social and moral justice which has an essentially universal flavour, surpassing and overriding petty partisan loyalties, encompassing within it all life, human as well as animal. After witnessing the global horrors of World War II in which both the Allies and Axis groups gleefully participated, there came about in the world, of both the victors and the vanquished, an awareness to safeguard life, and to eliminate threats to it from those who blatantly violate them. But with a lamentably lopsided religious culture which the greater part of the power-packed world had inherited up to that time, what mattered to them under the concept of life was only human life. So in drafting the Universal Charter of Fundamental Human Rights, they placed this rather awkwardly limited concept of respect for human life as its item number one. But let us not forget that it was more than fifty years ago that this error of judgement did take place. In the world of thinking men, of both science and religion, much water has flowed since then.

But Buddhist statecraft in the context of the Universal Monarch or Cakkavatti

King, shows far greater magnanimity. And forget not that this was more than two and a half millennia ago. When they insisted that in territories which respected the authority of the Cakkavatti King no life is to be destroyed or *pāṇo na hantabbo*, they meant that all life should be respected, including bird and beast. Religiously, Buddhism denied man the right to ride roughshod over or exploit the world of animals, through any religious sanction or materialistic secular thinking. We are indeed glad to note that globally a greater part of the saner and sober world today is moving in this direction of respect for life of all forms.

But a look back in the direction of Buddhist history across the world, perhaps over a stretch of nearly two thousand years, gratifyingly proves that many regions both in the east and west of Asia had approved and endorsed the wholesomeness of this way of Buddhist thinking. It would be worthwhile to make even few passing references to the existence of Buddhism and the widespread adoption of Buddhist thinking in these regions.

Recorded history reveals the early spread of Buddhism outside India. Thanks to the energy and enthusiasm of Emperor Asoka, the message of Buddhism was well known outside India within a few centuries after the passing away of the Buddha. Islamic historian Abu'l - Rayhan Muhammad al Biruni wrote more than a thousand years ago about the existence of Buddhism in those regions during the early centuries of the Christian era. He was certainly writing about us and not for us. This is what he has written down.

'In former times Khorasan, Persia, Iraq, Mosul, the country up to the frontier of Syria, was Buddhistic, but then Zarathustra went forth from Adharbayjan and preached Magism in Balkh (Baktra) ... The succeeding kings made their religion (i.e. Zoroastrianism) the obligatory state religion of Persia and Iraq. In consequence, the Buddhists were banished from those countries and had to emigrate to the countries east of Balkh.'

[B.A. Livinsky in Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, Vol. IV. Fasc.I. p. 21]

On the eastern side of Asia, Buddhism was already in China by 50 A.D.

during the reign of Emperor Ming Ti. Buddhism in Korea and thereafter in Japan, were easy and natural processes of delivery, with no precipitous and invading Caesarean interventions. Arrival of new religions in many countries have witnessed considerable bloodshed. But the arrival of Buddhism in any land never gave rise to such dreadful situations. Emperor Asoka had already linked up Sri Lanka and Myanmar [Burma] into this net-work. Little wonder then that already on the advent of the first millennium, the Buddhist world in Asia, east and west, was like a glorious evening sky with glittering stars everywhere. The brightness of their light was adequately interacting.

After Duṭṭhagāmaṇi's triumph in his war of liberation in Sri Lanka, the Buddhists of the Middle Eastern countries were so delighted that they are supposed to have sent a good deal of foreign aid, and that without any strings, for the construction of the Mahāthūpa or Ruvanvelisāya in Anuradhapura. It was well and truly a post-war memorial of peace and stability in the land. One of these good-will missions to Sri Lanka was headed by Thera Dhammarakkhita of the Yonaka country [i.e. a Buddhist territory in the region of the Middle East]. Pre-eminence of Buddhist scholarship at the Mahavihara in Anuradhapura attracted the Chinese traveller monk Fa Hsien to reside there and copy some of our original Tripitaka Pali texts to be taken back home to China. These are evidence of the global acceptance of the benevolent and magnanimous policies emanating from Buddhist thinking.

The dawn of the twentieth century, linked up with the tail end of the nineteenth, witnessed the arrival of Buddhism in the western world. In the life of man, and Buddhism giving the woman her rightful place as not being subsidiary from her very genesis, people found Buddhism providing answers to many unexplained and unsolved problems of human life. A much looked out for missing link in human thinking was discovered, as it were. Anthropocentrism of Buddhism, together with its unequivocal rejection of creationist theories, the just and fair law of karma as against vindictive punishment of evil doers, self-redemption of man in contrast to the role of a divine redeemer, all these

undoubtedly appear at first sight to be strange and unorthodox. Challenging as they are, they are also declared to be the basic attractions of Buddhist thinking.

Buddhism did not stoop low to play to the gallery of human emotions. The Buddha openly declared the stature, the weight and the depth of the message he had for the world. ' It was with great difficulty I acquired it ', he said [*Kicchena me adhigatam*]. It requires an up-stream journeying [*paṭisota-gāmiṃ*]. It is wise, profound, subtle and not easily comprehended [*nipunam gambhīram duddasaṃ aṇum*]. To accord with it, one has to change one's life style, one has to reduce one's greed for the world [*Rāga-rattā na dakkhinti*]. The sanity and sensibility of the world reaching its high-water mark today, mere beliefs and dogmas being challenged, science and philosophy agreeing to stand on a common pedestal, it is not at all surprising that Buddhism today is the fastest spreading religion in many parts of the world.

Two and a half millennia of history has witnessed Buddhism, like a prism, reflecting different shades of light. But all out of the same centre. All these segments like the Theravada, Mahayana and the Vajrayana are all fully aware of this unity at the core. That is the down-to-earth reality of Sakyamuni as the historical Buddha. We are all agreed that man has to be the saviour of man. It our mission to sponsor this in a world where men and women have to truly understand their identity. That they have in themselves an inner worth, a capacity to make themselves sublime. Human problems are undoubtedly of down to earth origin. They must be handled here, with men and women as witnesses to what they do, out of their choice and out of their seeking.

As we visualize it, this has to be the mission of the Buddhists of the world today. Let us link up universally, with one unmistakable identity of Buddhistness anywhere and everywhere in the world. Man must personally correct himself first to correct the world order. Let each one attend to personal self-correction through personal self-discipline. Then one is more than ever ready to correct the world. The motive to do this must necessarily be born of a genuine love for mankind. This must stem from a tremendous amount of inborn magnanimity and large-

heartedness which immediately relates itself to an awareness of one's own wishes and aspirations. One's attitude to one's own life is given as the basis for this.

The universal truth, according to Buddhism, is that everyone loves one's life [*sabbesaṃ jīvitam piyaṃ*] and this fact that one wishes to live and does not choose to die [*jīvitukāmo amaritukāmo*] in itself requires that one treats everybody else in the same manner that one loves oneself and cause no harm or injury to another [*attānam upamaṃ katvā na haneyya na ghātaye*]. It is in this spirit of love or *mettā* that one has to opt to correct others. The legitimacy to do this can be acquired only through the self-correctness one has achieved for oneself. This is where one has to see the mutually inter-active usefulness of developing loving kindness, realizing both the relevance and the need to do so as well as the legitimacy and the right for such line of action.